

**Open letter to Minister Thoko Didiza  
Call for an agroecology strategy and programme in the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform  
and Rural Development**

2 December 2022

Ms Thoko Didiza, Minister of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development

In copy

Mr Mooketsa Ramasodi, Director General, Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development

Nkosi Zwelivelile Mandela, Chairperson, Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development

Prof Julian May, Dr Tshilidzi Madzivhandila and Prof Mark Swilling, National Planning Commission

Ms Joyene Isaacs, Chairperson, Agricultural Research Council, and Prof Raymond Auerbach, ARC Board member

Dear Minister Didiza,

We note with great concern the Department of Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development (DALRRD)'s under-expenditure of R1.3 billion for the 2021/22 financial year. As members of the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Agriculture, Land Reform and Rural Development noted in their meeting on 11 October 2022, this is "disheartening, especially with the plight of farmers in the country. This action gave the impression that the department was uncaring and did not consider the difficult position farmers, particularly small-scale ones, faced" and is "unacceptable for the Department, as it plays a critical role in food security and economically uplifting many in society, including enterprises owned by the black majority."<sup>1</sup>

There is a large and consolidating network of household and smallholder farmer networks and associations and civil society support organisations with capacity for technical support on agronomy and livestock, training and facilitation of farmer-to-farmer learning, participatory landscape and watershed management, and organisational capacity building, including farmer associations, cooperatives, and small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs). These networks represent thousands of individuals, are active across the country and stand ready and willing to work with DALRRD and other government departments and agencies to contribute to realising the many objectives we have in common.

These networks are working on an explicitly agroecological foundation. The term "agroecology" has gained much traction globally, especially in the past 10-15 years. In essence, practitioners and organisations in South Africa have identified three core elements for agroecology, namely:

- Ecological sustainability
- Social justice and redress
- Economic fairness and participation.

Practitioners and organisations may have diverse approaches within these, but there is widespread agreement on the basic elements.

In turn, these core elements which have emerged from homestead and smallholder farmers and support organisations in South Africa align well with established global principles, mostly notably the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/35688/>

UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO)'s 10 elements of agroecology<sup>2</sup>, and more recently the FAO Committee on World Food Security (CFS)'s 13 principles of agroecology<sup>3</sup>. These latter principles incorporate the FAO 10 elements and strengthen the social and economic justice aspects of the definition of agroecology.

The alignment between the core elements emerging from the ground in South Africa and the CFS/FAO principles are as follows:

Core element	CFS 13 principles
Environmental sustainability	Recycling, input reduction, soil health, animal health, biodiversity, land and natural resource governance, synergy
Social justice and redress	Co-creation of knowledge, social values and diets, participation
Economic fairness and participation	Economic diversification, fairness, connectivity

These principles also align very strongly with the South African government's stated agenda. South Africa has signed international agreements that require action across a range of related topics, integrating agricultural production and development with ecological conservation and sustainable use. These include the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCDD) on sustainable land management practices, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the UN Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) amongst others. The South African government was a firm champion of UNDROP in the United Nations, a position strongly supported by the agroecology networks in the country. We would like to work with government to carry these into national programmes.

As household and smallholder farmers and organisations working on agroecology, we strongly believe that agroecology is an integrated and appropriate response to the multiple challenges facing both smallholder production in the era of climate change and global disruptions, and those facing the country as a whole in ongoing efforts to secure an effective transformation of the country towards democracy, social justice and redress of past injustices, and an inclusive economy. Agroecology is a potentially effective response to meeting multiple government objectives as stated in numerous policies and plans, ranging from the (draft) National Comprehensive Producer Support Policy, the conservation agriculture (CA) and climate smart agriculture (CSA) frameworks as they have been drafted, food and nutrition security, natural resource management, biodiversity conservation and sustainable use, land redistribution, water access and use, localisation, cooperative and small enterprise development, spatial planning, local economic development, women and youth, and participation amongst others. In their recent assessment of food systems in South Africa, the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI)/National Research Foundation (NRF) Centre of Excellence in Food Security has called for support for transitions to agroecological food systems<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> FAO. 2018. "The 10 elements of agroecology: Guiding the transition to sustainable food and agricultural systems", <https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/I9037EN/>

<sup>3</sup> CFS 2019. "Agroecological and other innovative approaches for sustainable agriculture and food systems that enhance food security and nutrition", <https://www.fao.org/3/ca5602en/ca5602en.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> FAO, European Union, CIRAD and DSI-NRF Centre of Excellence in Food Security (CoE-FS). 2022. "Food Systems Profile – South Africa. Catalysing the sustainable and inclusive transformation of food systems". Rome, Brussels, Montpellier and Bellville, <https://www.fao.org/3/cc0071en/cc0071en.pdf>

Such a position is supported by multilateral global institutions including those that the South African government actively participates in. These include the FAO<sup>5</sup>, CGIAR institutions<sup>6</sup> and the recently formed Agroecology Coalition<sup>7</sup> which emerged from the UN Food Systems Summit. The Agroecology Coalition is a multi-actor coalition including 39 countries, and many national and multi-lateral research institutes, donors and civil society organisations. African governments have strongly embraced the Coalition, with 17 African governments plus the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Union signing onto the Coalition to date. The Coalition has adopted the CFS principles in defining agroecology.

However, despite the potential of agroecology to respond to numerous objectives of the government and of DALRRD in particular, there is currently not a single government programme or even pilot on agroecology. We do note the continued narrative that agroecology is welfarist and is not able to meet the food needs of the country at large. However, this claim has no scientific backing and must be considered only an opinion until such time as there are properly constituted scientific studies to show evidence one way or another about the benefits and weaknesses of different farming systems. It is important to recognise that comprehensive indicators should be developed across all the 13 CFS principles rather than reducing the measurement to yields alone, for example. Issues of soil health, biodiversity, resilience, health and nutrition, social redress and participation, and improved access to resources and economic opportunities for marginalised and vulnerable individuals and groups should also be considered in comparing farming and food systems.

As indicated, homestead and smallholder farmer networks and CSO support networks are active and ready to work with government to assist in realising commonly-held national development objectives.

We call on DALRRD and the South African government to implement the following:

- Establish an Agroecology Coordinator within DALRRD to initiate and champion the process to convene relevant actors, including homestead and smallholder agroecology farmer networks, agroecology civil society support organisations, relevant government Departments and directorates, and other actors as required.
- Work with homestead and smallholder farmers, CSOs and other relevant actors to develop an integrated agroecology strategy and programme, incorporating (amongst others) land allocation, ecological inputs, extension services, demonstration plots, decentralised agroecology centres, infrastructure, nutrition, climate change adaptation, waste recycling and management, natural resource management, research and monitoring and evaluation (M&E), learning and sharing (in particular peer-to-peer learning exchanges, agroecology curricula at schools, universities and other training institutions, on-farm learnerships), market standards and certification, agro-processing, SMME and cooperative support, market support and information, local economic development, public procurement, communications and awareness, and financial support.
- Implement selected pilot projects in specific locations based on multi-actor discussion, planning and implementation in local and/or district fora. There is a key role here for strong partnerships and capacitated local municipalities and districts for coordination, building on the District Development Model.
- Take forward UNDROP, and include agroecology as a key framing and response in the agriculture sector Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation Plan (CCAMP).
- Agricultural Research Council (ARC) and agricultural research institutes to work with farmer networks and CSOs to develop and implement participatory longitudinal studies comparing

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fao.org/agroecology/overview/our-work/en/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cgiar.org/initiative/31-transformational-agroecology-across-food-land-and-water-systems/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://agroecology-coalition.org/>

conventional and agroecological practices across a range of environmental, social and economic indicators.

We stand ready to work with DALRRD to realise these activities and objectives, and call on the Department to engage systematically and meaningfully with our networks.

Regards,

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Endorsing organisations/networks:

Abalimi Bezekhaya

African Centre for Biodiversity

African Climate Reality Project

Agrarian Reform for Food Sovereignty Campaign

Association for Rural Advancement

Association for Water and Rural Development

Biowatch South Africa

Buffalo City PGS

Cape Town PGS

Delta Programme

DSI/NRF South African Research Chair: Environmental and Social Dimensions of the Bio-economy

East Cape Agricultural Research Project

eGoli PGS

Environmental and Rural Solutions

Environmental Monitoring Group

Food and Trees for Africa

Foundation for Human Rights

Good Food Network

Greenheart Organics PGS

Greenhouse Project

Hoedspruit Hub

Indigo development & change

Khanyisa Education and Development Trust

Land Access Movement of South Africa

Mahlathini Development Foundation

Mapulaneng Heritage Council

Monti PGS

Mpumalanga Provincial Institute for Civil Society Organisations

National Labour and Economic Development Institute

Nkuzi Development Association

Ogwini South Farmers PGS

Participatory Guarantee Systems South Africa

Rural Women's Assembly  
SaveAct  
Seed 2 Harvest  
SK Agricare  
South African Organic Sector Organisation  
Southern Africa Food Lab  
Support Centre for Land Change  
Surplus People Project  
Sustaining the Wild Coast  
The Movement in Africa  
Trust for Community Outreach and Education  
Tshintsha Amakhaya  
Unpoison network  
Western Cape Farmers PGS  
Women's Leadership and Training Programme